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Socrates as a Philosophical Exemplar

Aria Mia Loberti
ariamialoberti@my.uri.edu

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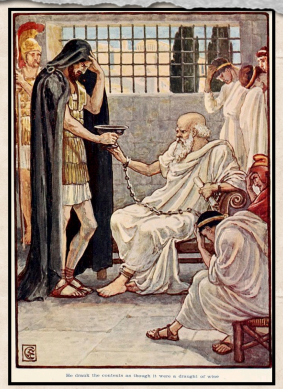
Sponsor: Doug Reed, Philosophy

Introduction:

Socrates – as characterized in Plato's dialogues - famously denies being a teacher. Nonetheless, others took him to be a teacher and there is no doubt that his attempts to encourage people to philosophy are pedagogical. So, we are presented with a puzzle, one that is still with interpreters today, despite important work on the issues. My research takes up these issues, but we pursue them from a different angle: asking not whether Socrates is a teacher, or whether philosophy can be taught, but considering Socrates as a philosophical exemplar. I contend that this question will help us to understand not only Socrates but also Platonic philosophy.

Is Socrates a Teacher?



Socrates has influence and authority among his friends and interlocutors. Undeniably, although there are clear distinctions between the historical Socrates and the character Socrates, offered up in the dialogues. Plato himself can be described as a student of Socrates; Plato used Socrates' wisdom to craft the dialogues and start a conversation that has inspired generations of philosophers thereafter. However, within the dialogues, Socrates often denies that he is a teacher at all—an issue that is salient in Apology.

In the dialogues, there is evidence to both sides of the question of Socrates as teacher. The cases below from *Apology* and *Lysis* are not isolated; nearly every dialogue has evidence for or against the claim, setting out a clear puzzle. As a result of this disconnect, many scholars have worked to answer the question of whether Socrates is a teacher.

Apology – Socrates Denies Being a Teacher

"I have never been anyone's teacher," Socrates persists, adding that he will question equally the rich or the poor, without fee (33a-b).

"If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone," he says (33a-b).

Socrates may not be "a pedagogue in the ordinary Greek sense, but neither is he a teacher in the manner of the Sophists…because Socrates will be ever anxious to contrast his own mode of philosophical inquiry" (Scott, 13-14).

Socrates specifically argues that he is an avid questioner and an innately curious interlocutor, rather than in the service of educating anyone (*Apology,* 33a6).

Lysis – Socrates Behaves Like a Teacher

Socrates questions Lysis' relationship with his parents, saying that, if they do love Lysis, than they must want him to always be happy. Lysis counters that in fact his parents do not permit him to do whatever he pleases (207). Socrates presses him, and Lysis yields that his parents consider him more as a slave than as free (208b).

The argument can be read as a witty use of the Socratic method. Socrates primes Lysis to be open to receiving wisdom. Of course, as Lysis and Socrates explore, Lysis is not a true slave to his parents; he simply lacks the wisdom at his young age to have complete freedom. Socrates offers Lysis an example of how to argue well, which he encourages Lysis to share. We might say that Socrates, thus, has taught Lysis.

Scholarly Responses

Some scholars, like A. Nehamas, say we must take Socrates' seriously when he claims he is not a teacher. Nehamas considers whether Socrates was a teacher of *arête*—"an ethical teacher who can show others how to live a good and successful life." He argues that Socrates cannot teach *arête,* since he does not live "a model for…the good life."While he might model virtue, Socrates neither *promises* nor *attempts* to teach others virtue.

A. Mintz argues that Socrates offers "something that could reasonably be described as educational". He brings something out of interlocutors and awakens intellectual engagement in Athens. "Socrates questions, cajoles, challenges, encourages, and chastises his interlocutors in an attempt to educate them"; these are pedagogical tools. Likewise, in *Apology,* Socrates refers to "tightly knit bonds of a teacher and his faithful disciples." Mintz considers that Socrates may be ironic when he denies he is a teacher.

Philosophical Exemplarship

The question of Socrates as a teacher is thus an important one, not only because Plato himself takes it seriously, but also because it gives us insight into both Socrates' motives and character—and what it means to be a teacher in the first place. Mintz argues that Plato does not offer his own definition of teaching in *Apology*. We are left in a state of *aporia,* with evidence on both sides within the dialogues and in contemporary scholarship. My solution: to approach Socrates not through the model of teaching but as a philosophical exemplar.

Definition L. Zagzebski introduces an exemplar as an individual to whom we are drawn "because we admire something easily observable about them," particularly the performance of admirable acts. Exemplars are: "those persons whom we see, on close observation and with reflection, to be admirable in all or most of their acquired traits." That which we admire is not merely rooted in "natural temperament" but also are, following Aristotle, "internal to the person's psychology". We are born with certain temperaments—for instance, courage, fairness, gentleness, etc.—which are not necessarily virtues until we put them into practice in intentionally virtuous ways. This embodied quality is grounded "in our disposition to admiration," since we are inclined to admire those who act admirably and virtuously with breadth, depth, strength, and consistency. Thus, I define **a philosophical exemplar** as a person "whom we see, on close observation and with reflection, to be admirable in all or most of their acquired" philosophical traits and actions. By this definition, we do not focus on the natural traits of a philosopher but on the traits that are acquired.

Why It Matters Considering Socrates as a philosophical exemplar lets us dive a bit deeper into what it means to practice philosophy and aid others on their philosophical path. The question of whether Socrates' is a teacher does not have to exist mutually exclusively from his bearings as a philosophical exemplar. Furthermore, the exemplar question helps us tie into the spirit of Aristotle, Plato, and the Greeks in general, for whom the concept of exemplarism was culturally, artistically, and philosophically important. The exemplar offers tools others can use to open their mind, and a sounding board upon which to test and challenge. The receiver of this input is not passive. This relationship is transactional and built upon conversation, such that the exemplar, too, betters themselves through interactions with their peers and students. A large part of the exemplar's role is filled through conversation and discourse—which Socrates practices in *Phaedo*. He sees these friends as worthy interlocutors, and accepts their counterarguments as worthy considerations.

"ἐγὼ δὲ διδάσκαλος μὲν οὐδενὸς πώποτ' ἐγενόμην·"

"And I have not ever been anyone's teacher."

Socrates to the jury in *Symposium*, 33a5

Socrates As Exemplar

To fully realize whether Socrates fits a definition of a philosophical exemplar, we must consider Plato's characteristics and definitions of a true philosopher. Unfortunately, hedoes not lay out an explicit illustration, but he does give us a clear and developed description of how faulty or counterfeit philosophers might appear. Through the image of the failed philosopher, we can create an ideal of its complement, the true philosopher, and understand how Socrates fits that persona. More than mere traits, the philosopher lives particular lifestyle.

- **Wisdom:** Socrates says philosopher is bound by the limits of being human, meaning that they cannot be wise, since wisdom is a quality only the gods fully embody. "[N]one of the gods loves wisdom or wants to become wise," Socrates explains in *Symposium*, "for they are wise," and the philosopher will "fall in between those two extremes" of wisdom and ignorance (204a-b). In *Phaedrus,* Socrates says "wise" is an adjective proper only for a god. Calling a philosopher "wisdom's lover" is more seemly. This connects with Socrates frequent proclamation that he knows nothing, and refusal to call himself wise.
- **Truth:** Socrates describes men who face death with a willingness to visit the underworld and reunite with the person they lost. In *Phaedo,* he analogizes philosophers similarly: "Will then a true lover of wisdom, who has a similar hope and knows that he will never find it to any extent except in Hades, be resentful of dying and not gladly undertake the journey thither?…[I]f he is a true philosopher, for he is firmly convinced that he will not find pure knowledge anywhere except there" (68a2-b1). This solidifies the philosopher as valuing truth more than anything Likewise, if someone is a "[lover] of opinion," then they could not be a true philosopher, since opinion does not lead to wisdom, as described in *Republic.*
- **Questioning:** In *Euthydemus,* Socrates cites that the philosopher has the need to question things, rather than merely tick off correct answers to others' questions. For instance, Socrates says he is inclined to, whenever he does not understand a question or its answer, to do his best to understand the full nature and context (295b8). This is reflected in *Theaetetus,* when Socrates says: "wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else" (155d).
- **Argument:** In *Phaedo,* Socrates references haters of argument, misologists. Earlier in the dialogue, One learns to hate argument when an unknowledgeable person puts faith in someone and believes that person to be totally truthful, but then finds that person untrustworthy. One who is not skillful in argument put their faith in the argument itself, and "puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false" (89b). They would believe the argument to be true, and fluctuate to see it as false, regardless of the argument's actual truth or falsity. Often, these people consider themselves wise for pinpointing the contradictions in an argument. By extension, they claim that arguments overall are unsound or unreliable. Such mistrust leads to a hatred of arguments overall, misology. Plato says misologists' behavior is on the opposite ends of the human spectrum from philosophers' love for argument. The philosopher is positioned to help other individuals develop the skill of understanding argument, rather than just making arguments. The genuine philosopher must be driven by the truth first and the argument is only a means to support the truth.

From these statements about disingenuous or counterfeit philosophy, it follows that ideal philosophers would, like Socrates, believe themselves to know nothing, which inspires them to pursue wisdom in whichever ways they can, rather than believe they possess any wisdom they need already. With this in mind, we understand a philosopher to not simply desire wisdom but also shirk falsehood. Socrates reflects this in his unyielding desire to question any person on any topic, particularly non-philosophers, to better understand how they reason and what they know, before he forms his own opinion on a topic or claims to 'know' something fully. He puts himself in a position to pursue the wisdom he might be lacking, regardless of what an outsider's perspective of his behaviors might be.

Potential Counterarguments

In *Republic,* Socrates says he is would not be an ideal Philosopher King, despite his potential But, he has not developed the appropriate education throughout his life, and thus cannot be considered for such a role. Socrates says that only a minority of those who practice philosophy are worthy of this pursuit. It is the effects of others' corruption, or of the city's inability to foster true philosophers, that limits an individual from becoming a model philosopher. Those who have come to value philosophy realize the power and "madness" of the majority results in "hardly anyone [acting] sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might to the aid of justice and survive" (496c-d). So, the philosopher seeks refuge from the lawless. Rather than follow the Athenian jury's thinking in *Apology* that suggests that philosophers will corrupt the youth and be out of touch with the gods, this image of a just city makes philosophers necessary to societal and political functioning. I propose, however, that, instead of invalidating Socrates' ability to be a philosophical exemplar due to the nature of the majority and the city alone, we instead interpret him more charitably, as a best possible version of a philosopher under these circumstances. Socrates' character offers us a more realistic, possible view of a what a philosopher might exemplify even amidst the challenges of Athenian culture. In this way, Socrates is the ideal philosophical for us, for everyday people, limited as he is by human nature, as well as inescapable sociopolitical conditions. Socrates falls short of philosophy's demands not only because he is human but also because Plato is characterizes him for readers bound too by the limits of humanity and mortality. In other words, Socrates needs to be flawed so that we can be reliant on philosophy, rather than follow him as a divine or perfectly paradigmatic figure. Philosopher kings might be *the* exceptional philosophers, but they will do no work turning others toward, or guiding others within, the path of philosophy. Socrates, on the other hand, has this power to influence and inspire interlocutors.

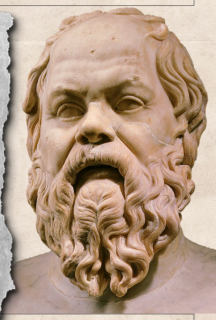
Conclusion

Socrates demonstrates philosophical exemplarship, as he engages with interlocutors and inspires others to consider philosophy's teachings. Plato emphasizes that Socrates is among friends in *Phaedo*, that those friends chose to spend time with him before he dies, and that those with whom Socrates shares is final hours were all philosophers whom Socrates serves as a mentor figure. Socrates' wife Xanthippe even laments over Socrates' last moments with his friends, and how truly valuable such conversation are to him. Socrates primes his interlocutors to do philosophy—for sake of philosophy itself, rather than to appease him. This is can be distinguished from the concept of 'teaching,' and I argue it falls under the title of philosophical exemplarship, because it includes an empathetic connection that is authoritative yet still akin to friendship.

"ὦ Σώκρατες, ὕστατον δή σε προσεροῦσι νῦν οἱ ἐπιτήδειοιαὶ σὺ τούτους."

"Socrates, for the last time now, your associates will address you and you them."

Xanthippe to Socrates in *Phaedo*, 60a



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